The Mountains Son

Benguet, Philippines

It wasn't a rooster that woke him up, but the soft swish of his mother's broom on the dirt floor. Before the sun was fully up, a fine mist of dust would already be in the air, a constant reminder of the life they lived. The dust stuck to his skin and clothes, a symbol of their simple, hardworking life.

Their small house, built on stilts to stay safe from floods, was home to ten people. There were no inside walls, just one big room where the family slept side-by-side on woven mats. As the youngest of nine, he often felt lonely, even with everyone so close. His older brothers and sisters would tease and bully him, and their mean words made him cry, a painful reminder that he was at the bottom of the family's world.

Life in their secluded valley was controlled by the sun, the rain, and the land. Their family survived by planting chayote. The mountains were as green as the trees because of the rows of chayote vines that grew on their slopes. Every morning before dawn, his father would leave for the small farm, his body a dark shape against the morning light. He would work alone until the sun came up, but a much bigger job came every week.

On one day, he and his siblings would be woken up earlier than the rest. Their job was to carry the chayote harvest down the mountain. They would put heavy loads, about 25 kilos each, in baskets or on a handmade carrier called a **"tokyod,"** which rested the weight on their forehead. For twenty minutes, they would walk down a steep, slippery path to the highway. The path was dangerous, and he could see the pain on their faces, tired shoulders and tight muscles in their necks. He would often hear them fighting, filled with frustration about a life they didn't choose.

Education was a precious thing, and this weekly task often made them late for school. They would carry the heavy chayote from 5 AM in the morning, then rush home to get ready for their one-hour walk to school. They were all in it together, walking the long path, their exhaustion and dirt-caked faces a shared burden. By the time they arrived, the sun would be high in the sky, and they would be exhausted and covered in sweat and dirt.

He could see, even as twelve years old, the hard truth of their lives. He would stand at the window, watching his siblings disappear up the mountain and praying for a miracle. He wished he would not grow up fast, desperate to avoid the day when he would have to carry those baskets himself. He hoped that by the time he was old enough, their lives would have already changed. He hoped his turn would never come.

A family of nine meant that every moment was a shared one. The house felt huge with the constant noise of eight children and their parents. He, the youngest, watched his sisters help their mother with chores, and his brothers head out with his father at dawn.

They were a small army, each with a job to do. There was no time for being lazy. Every person was needed to gather firewood, work the small farm, and cook their simple meals of rice and vegetables. In the evening, the house was filled with quiet chatter. The sounds were comforting, a reminder that they faced their hard life together. Their poverty was not a source of shame, but a common ground that held them together.

His mother was a quiet, strong woman. Her hands were rough from years of work, but her voice was always gentle. His father was a man of few words, but his presence was a heavy comfort. He taught the children how to work in the chayote farm and how to make things grow in the hard soil. In this tiny, secluded world, they were everything to each other. The small hut, with its ten souls, was a fortress against a world that had forgotten them.

When he was a little boy, the family of nine was a family of eleven. His two older brothers, the ones he never met, lived only in the quiet grief that hung in the air like the morning mist. He saw their faces in old photos, tracing their kind eyes and gentle smiles, trying to imagine their laughter.

Their absence was a constant, silent presence. His mother's smile never quite reached her eyes when the family gathered, and his father would sometimes sit alone, looking out at the valley with a deep sadness. He learned that a family's strength is not just in the people who are there, but in the memories of the people who are gone. Their deaths were a constant reminder of how fragile life was. It gave him a deep drive to fight for every breath, every meal, and every chance he got. He felt a duty to live not just for himself, but for them as well.

His drive, fueled by his sister's success and the memory of his brothers, grew into a raging fire. But going to college in the city was a lonely, shocking experience. He felt a deep depression, not just from being away from his family, but from the realization that his struggle had just started. His village clothes a single pair of slacks and a red t-shirt were more than just clothes. They were a constant, silent witness to his hardships. He held onto them, a physical reminder of his roots.

When he went home, he saw his mother work on other farms for a system they called **"purdiya,"** to earn a small amount of money. When she gave him one thousand pesos for his allowance, his heart would ache with a heavy guilt. He knew that money was earned with her sweat and exhaustion, and he promised himself that when he became a teacher, his first paycheck would be a huge celebration for his parents a chance to show them the city life they had only ever dreamed of.

But that day never came.

In March of 2024, his mother died from chronic kidney disease. He later learned that she had refused dialysis, saying it was a waste of money. ***"Lawa tan wat sayang di pilak you,"*** she would say, which meant, "No, we don't have money, it's just a waste of money." ***"Magay pilak tako baken takon baknang,"*** she would add, "We are not rich enough to afford dialysis, we are not rich." No matter how much they begged, she refused, not wanting to be a burden. Her death was a gut-wrenching heartbreak for all of them. For him, it was a profound loss of faith and hope. The light that had guided him was gone.

In that darkness, his brothers and sisters stepped in. They reminded him he was almost at the end of his college journey, just months away. Their encouragement became his new fuel, and he found the strength to keep going. He knew his degree would be the best tribute he could give to his mother's memory.

After many rejections, he finally found a part-time job as a waiter in a bar. It was a humbling but necessary step. The money was just enough for his rent and allowances, a lifeline for the days his family couldn't send money. He was thankful for the job that let him stand on his own feet.

His hard work paid off. He finished college with a degree in Secondary Education, major in English. A month later, he received a scholarship to study at the University of the People, a distance education school in Pasadena, USA. He is now finishing his associate degree in Business Administration. He also got a contract job in his hometown as an administrative aide. The job wasn't in his field and the pay was small, but he saw it as another step forward. He knew a time would come when all his struggles would be worth it, not because life would become easy, but because he had become strong enough to handle it.

You have read this story as if it belongs to someone else. You have seen a boy fighting a world that had forgotten him and his family. But now, at the end, I must tell you that the story you just read is my own. The child who woke to the broom, who watched his siblings disappear, and who fought to finish his studies—that child was me.

It is now 2025. Life goes on. My father is still in the village, working on his small farm, and I visit him often. The world is much bigger than the valley I grew up in, but my family's love is still the foundation that holds me up.

I chose to tell my story this way because I wanted you to see the world through my eyes, without knowing who I was. I wanted you to feel the hardships and the loneliness, the strength and the hope, as if they were your own. My journey taught me that life's biggest struggles can also be its greatest lessons.

The first lesson I learned was that **perseverance is a necessity**. My mother's hard work, my father's silent strength, and my sister's constant fight for her dream—they showed me that you do not give up, no matter how tired or hungry you are.

The second lesson was that **loneliness can be a powerful motivator**. Being alone in the city taught me to rely on my own strength. It was a hard time, but it gave me a resilience I wouldn't trade for anything. It taught me that while community is good, a strong sense of self is a fortress you build yourself.

Finally, I learned that **the best path is not always the one you expect**. My job as an administrative aide, a seemingly small step, is just as important as my degrees. Every step is a building block, and every hardship is part of a bigger plan. A time will come when things are good, not because life is easy, but because you are strong enough to face it.